A Bad Night's Sleep on Campus: An Interview Study of First Year University Students with Poor Sleep Quality

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Background: Poor sleep quality is common in university students, and increases the risk of mental illness and poor academic attainment. It is therefore critical to understand what may cause or aggravate poor sleep in students. First year students living on campus are particularly worthy of attention, due to their distinctive sleeping circumstances: they are adapting to a new lifestyle, sleep in close proximity to new peers, and experience environmental noise and academic stress.

Method: Fifteen first year undergraduates with poor sleep quality completed in-depth interviews, in which they were asked about aspects of university life that might contribute to their poor sleep quality.

Results: Four main themes were constructed from the data using thematic analysis: the social context of noise problems; the lure of socialising with peers; the cost of having an unstructured academic lifestyle; and the wide-reaching impact of poor sleep quality on university life. Flatmates and friends were central to poor sleep quality on campus, because they caused excessive noise and provided an easy opportunity to socialise late into the night. Academic factors, including students working late at night and spending all day in their bedrooms, were also key.

Conclusion: Fundamental aspects of moving to university, including living with peers and adapting to a new academic schedule, may increase the risk of students’ poor sleep quality. When designing interventions to minimise the risk of poor sleep quality in first year students, unique aspects of the campus environment, including the close proximity to new peers, must be addressed.